

# Proposed 2005-07 Policy Initiative

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| <b>Name of Initiative</b>      | Farm-to-School Direct Marketing  |
| <b>Sponsor</b>                 | Children's Health and Well-Being (Proposed)  |
| <b>Lead Staff</b>              | Tara Wolff, Craig McLaughlin   |
| <b>Other Committees</b>        | Health Disparities   |
| <b>Summary</b>                 | Partner with the Washington State Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health, and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to recommend policies that would encourage schools to purchase fresh produce from local farmers to serve in school cafeterias.   |
| <b>SHR Strategic Direction</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain and improve the public health system<br><input type="checkbox"/> Ensure fair access to critical health services<br><input type="checkbox"/> Improve health outcomes and increase value<br><input type="checkbox"/> Explore ways to reduce health disparities<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Improve nutrition and increase physical activity<br><input type="checkbox"/> Reduce tobacco use<br><input type="checkbox"/> Safeguard environments that sustain human health   |
| <b>Governor's Initiatives</b>  | <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Containment<br><input type="checkbox"/> Cover all Kids by 2010<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Healthiest State in the Nation   |
| <b>Possible Partners</b>       | Washington State Department of Agriculture<br>Department of Health<br>Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction<br>Children's Alliance  |
| <b>Criteria</b>                | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does the issue involve multiple agencies?<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Can a measurable difference be made?<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Prevalence, Severity and availability of interventions<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Level of public input/demand<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does it involve the entire state?<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does the Board have statutory authority?<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Do the resources exist to deal with the issue?<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does the Board have a potentially unique role? |

## **Problem Statement**

Board members have often expressed concerns over the nutritional content of foods served in school cafeterias. According to the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), “Menus in most school lunch programs are too high in saturated fat and cholesterol and too low in fiber- and nutrient-rich fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.” An April 2001 analysis by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), found that many school districts do not meet the national nutritional guidelines, even though groups like PCRM argue that these nutritional guidelines are inadequate. The menu choices of schools participating in the NSLP are often driven by the availability of subsidized and donated commodities through the USDA.

In May 2003, the Board heard from Paul Flock, Child Nutrition Manager for the Olympia School District, who described the establishment of an organic salad bar at a local elementary school. Overall student participation in the school lunch program increased and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables increased dramatically. The additional costs were offset by cutting out desserts offered three times per week. The organic salad bar program purchased fruits and vegetables directly from local growers. The program is now being replicated at other elementary and middle schools in Olympia.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) operates a Small Farm and Direct Marketing Program. Some 87 percent of farms in Washington State meet the USDA definition of a “small farm.” Staffers from this program have been working with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to develop a Farm-to-Cafeteria project designed to find creative solutions to help small farms sell directly to K-12 schools in Washington.

Washington State was one of four states and two tribal programs picked to pilot USDA’s free Fresh Fruit and Vegetables program, which was funded in 2004 as part of the Child Nutrition and WIC Act reauthorization. OSPI works with DOH and WSDA to identify 25 eligible schools each year. Schools are fully reimbursed for the cost of purchasing, preparing, and distributing the fruits and vegetables. Funding will continue through June 2009. Early pilots of this program found that children in participating schools upped their consumption of healthy snacks.

Some states have been more assertive in requiring fresh fruits and vegetables. For example, the nutritional policy of the Texas Department of Agriculture requires, “Fruit and/or vegetables should be offered daily on all points of service. Fruits and vegetables should be fresh whenever possible.”

WSDA Director Valoria Loveland is extremely interested in greatly expanding the reach of the Farm-to-Cafeteria Project, and recently asked for the Board’s help in pulling together an interagency work group. OSPI has some initial interest, as evidenced by its participation in the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables grant program, and Director Loveland has said she will personally urge State Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson to commit resources to this effort.

## **Potential Strategies**

Work with WSDA and other partners to develop a proposal or report that articulates the health benefits of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables in school meal programs, identifies logistical, legal, policy, and financial barriers to farm-to-school direct marketing, and proposes policy solutions to school districts, the Legislature, and others. Barriers would probably include bidding rules, higher costs, difficulty coordinating large buys, lack of awareness, and requirements by banks issuing farm loans that crops be “pre-sold.” Many of these barriers could be lowered through technical assistance, coordination, education, and policy changes.

## **Criteria**

### **Does the issue involve multiple agencies?**

Yes. USDA, WSDA, DOH, OSPI, local school districts.

### **Can a measurable difference be made?**

Probably. Early results from programs implemented on a small scale show increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, which has shown to be important in improving nutrition and reducing obesity.

### **Prevalence, severity and availability of interventions**

The Board is familiar with data concerning the prevalence and severity of poor nutrition, overweight, and obesity in children. A diet of nutrient rich foods low in saturated fats has been shown to lead to healthier weight. Children have been shown to eat more fruits and vegetables when they are fresh and more readily available than junk food.

### **Level of public input/demand**

In some school districts—Olympia being one example—parental demand for healthier meals that emphasize fresh fruits and vegetables is high. It is not known how widespread this sentiment is across the state. There is strong demand for better nutrition in school meal programs for health advocacy organizations such as the Children’s Alliance.

### **Does it involve the entire state?**

Yes. It would have an impact on students in school districts throughout the state. There are also small farms throughout the state. Agriculture is Washington’s number one employer. While farming is concentrated in the eastern portion of the state, the food processing industry is concentrated west of the Cascades. In King County alone, food processing is a \$4.8 billion industry employing more than 11,000 people.

### **Does the Board have statutory authority?**

The Board has authority to “explore ways to improve the health status of the citizenry.”

### **Do the resources exist to deal with the issue?**

Yes. There are already some programs in place—OSPI has the federal grant and WSDA has a small program in place to promote small farm direct marketing. The WSDA director has pledged to commit more resources to this effort and to work on getting a similar commitment from OSPI. This work is consistent with the DOH Physical Activity and Nutrition Plan. It is also consistent with the policy framework being developed by the Nutrition and Physical Activity Policy Leadership Group. Health groups and children’s advocacy groups would be likely partners. Farmers and food processors and their associations may be willing to commit additional resources.

**Does the Board have a potentially unique role?**

Yes. The Board is particularly well suited to act as a convener across agencies and constituencies and can bring public health policy expertise to the table. It has already established a recognized presence and a created a network of contacts on school nutrition issues. OSPI and WSDA would require public health partners to help establish the need for, and the potential benefits of, such a program.